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FM AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5105
INFO RUEHBP/AMEMBASSY BAMAKO 0376
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1753
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 8763
RUEHNM/AMEMBASSY NIAMEY 1429
RUEHNK/AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT 6178
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 2497
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ALGIERS 000027

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/08/2023

TAGS: PGOV PHUM KDEM AG

SUBJECT: THIRD TERM PUSH FOR BOUTEFLIKA STEAMROLLS FORWARD

REF: 07 ALGIERS 1749

Classified By: Ambassador Robert S. Ford; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: The move to amend the constitution to allow President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to run for an unprecedented third term in 2009 is now gathering steam. Almost immediately after the November 29 local elections, Prime Minister Belkhadem began painting the elections as a clear popular call for the third term, and today the issue occupies almost daily headlines. The Algerian government's (awkward) media machine is painting the drive for a third term as a response to public insistence that Bouteflika run again. In fact, it appears to be entirely an inside job. A select group of National Liberation Front (FLN) party insiders led by Prime Minister Belkhadem who are loyal to Bouteflika as their party leader are spearheading the effort. Some Algerians on the political elite cocktail circuit think members of Bouteflika's family also are pushing the idea of a third term. Several prominent voices -- including from within the FLN -- have come out publicly against the third term, speaking of their concern for the future of the FLN party and Algerian democracy in the face of the "Belkhadem Express" that is hurtling down the tracks, dragging them along for the ride. Meanwhile, the FLN's partners in the government coalition have said they think talk about a third Bouteflika term is premature, but we see no sign that the pockets of opposition to a third term will stop the Algerian administration from moving forward with changing the constitution to permit it. END SUMMARY.

HOW TO AMEND A CONSTITUTION

12. (C) Mohammed Abbou (protect source), a member of the FLN executive secretariat recently also appointed to the Constitutional Council, told us on January 8 how the process to change the constitution and open the way for a Bouteflika third term likely will unfold. (Abbou is a regular Embassy contact and the lone political member of the Constitutional Council, representing the entire parliament. The other seven members of the legal and consultative body are all judges or legal experts.) According to Abbou, the process of engineering a third term for Bouteflika will unfold as follows:

-- as a first step Bouteflika himself will formally seek the

Council's guidance, presenting a justification that Abbou said clearly would be based on the third term reflecting the "will of the people." Abbou expects this to happen in February.

-- the Council will then direct Bouteflika either to hold a popular referendum or to convene a special session of both houses of parliament.

-- in response, Bouteflika will hold either the referendum or the special session of parliament, probably in April or May, according to Abbou. Either option must be directed by Bouteflika himself, Abbou said.

Abbou said that the process of amending the constitution, since it is not specified in the constitution itself and does not require any change to the "political architecture" of the government, is far easier than the other major issue being discussed in the media and in the corridors of the Presidency: the creation of the post of vice president. Because the third term question was therefore easier for the Council to handle, Abbou speculated that the Council was more likely to recommend the parliament option rather than a popular referendum, although he said "it will depend on what justification" Bouteflika presents.

¶3. (C) Abbou stated that the role of the Constitutional Council (which is currently unable to meet in its newly constructed headquarters as the building was partially destroyed in the December 11 suicide bombings in Algiers) is to protect the constitution through consultation and advice. The will of the people, Abbou said, "is not our business." Since the way towards a third term for Bouteflika brings with

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it no systemic changes, Abbou said, the Council "would not interfere with the will of the people, if they want even ten mandates for Bouteflika." Abbou confirmed that Belkhadem is leading the charge for the third term, and that "the Belkhadem Express" had already left the station and was on its way to the Constitutional Council. He estimated that Bouteflika, after a highly visible round of campaigning around the country which began in Tamanrasset on January 6, would formally approach the Council in February, with the special session of parliament taking place in April or May.

¶4. (C) In response to our concerns that changing the constitution for one individual might be anti-democratic, Abbou said that the third term issue was not in itself anti-democratic, but that what really mattered was whether Algerian elections were carried out in a fair and transparent manner. Belkhadem's only mistake, according to Abbou, has been to disrespect the current constitution by pushing for a revision while in his role as prime minister, when he should instead be doing so in his capacity as head of the FLN.

RELUCTANT PASSENGERS ON THE BELKHADEM EXPRESS

¶5. (C) Points of opposition have begun to emerge publicly, even from within the FLN itself. Former Prime Minister Mouloud Hamrouche, a member of the FLN, at a December democracy seminar attended by the Ambassador slammed the idea of a constitutional amendment and third term, stating bluntly that the system was making decisions without any real input from the public and showing its essentially anti-democratic nature. Abdelhamid Mehri, a veteran of the war for independence and former member of the FLN central committee, told the Ambassador on December 30 that the third term was a terrible idea, indicating that there was no hope of much-needed change in the Algerian political system. Mehri observed that the Presidency and the security services still prefer to control political life much as the government still controls economic life. Mehri was not at all optimistic that the system would be willing or able to stop Belkhadem's

drive. Mehri, 81, said he wished the government would "take a chance and let people choose freely," though he conceded that many were still gun-shy after this approach resulted in the Islamist FIS victory in the 1990 local elections, provoking a government crackdown that led to civil war.

¶6. (C) Our sense is that Belkhadem is slowly molding an FLN consensus or at least acquiescence. In a conversation with the Ambassador on December 29, FLN Senator Miloud Habchi described a confrontational Belkhadem in front of the FLN central committee, determined to move forward with the drive for the third term at all costs and to drag the FLN with him.

Senior FLN leader and Senate Vice President Abdelrezak Bouhara had spoken out against rushing into the decision, according to Habchi, and Belkhadem was sharp with him, saying the FLN must maintain its discipline in discussing the issue outside the party's conference room. Habchi said he personally was concerned for the future of the party, since he perceived it to be losing voters. (Comment: Official Interior Ministry statistics confirm a decline, as the FLN percentage in the 2007 legislative elections dropped to 23.08 from 34.30 percent in the 2002 legislative elections. Similarly, the FLN won 31.09 percent of the overall votes in the 2007 local elections, down from 35.52 percent in 2002. End Comment.) FLN Senator Achoura Amouri told Ambassador on January 7 that the FLN central committee had still not voted or been consulted on the third term question. Another FLN central committee member, parliamentarian Azzedine Abdelmajid, confirmed this privately with the Ambassador the same day but Abdelmajid insisted there was no real opposition to a constitutional amendment within the top ranks of the FLN. Amouri confirmed that the campaign was driven by Belkhadem, although Amouri himself felt comfortable with the third term prospect since "there are no other obvious alternatives."

¶7. (C) Ali Benflis, who was initially the FLN candidate for president in 2004, described to us on January 5 "two FLNs." The first, he said, was the "official, made-for-television" party, which consisted of at most 20 percent of the party

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membership. This was the group of people Benflis said controlled the party and, by extension, the state. The remainder of the FLN was the "popular FLN," and it was irrelevant whether or not the popular FLN supported the third term, since the official FLN was, according to Benflis, perfectly capable of implementing its agenda in the name of the entire party. Abderrahmane Belayat, a former FLN senator and current member of the executive committee, echoed this, criticizing the press for referring to a crisis within the FLN. There is a division within the FLN, Belayat confirmed, but nothing nearly as serious as the crisis immediately following the 2004 presidential election where the party was severely split between Benflis supporters and the Bouteflika/Belkhadem camp. Even those within what Benflis called the "popular FLN" who oppose the third term were not speaking up, Belayat said, explaining that a silent and impotent majority was being dragged forward by a loyal minority. This minority, Belayat noted, hailed mostly from western Algeria, while many leaders of the "popular FLN" who hail from eastern Algeria are being increasingly marginalized.

OPPOSITION OUTSIDE THE FLN - BUT FOR HOW LONG?

¶8. (C) Opposition to the third term idea can also be found outside the FLN. Mahmoud Belheimer, editor-in-chief of Algeria's best-selling newspaper, el-Khabar, wrote in late December that the manner of bludgeoning a change in the constitution and anointing Bouteflika was indicative of the broader problem of a closed political system. The issue of a third term or even a constitutional amendment was less important than changing the entire manner by which the top leadership makes decisions, he declared. Former Prime

Minister Benbitour (who like Hamrouche and Benflis is usually on a short list of possible presidential successors) also publicly criticized the idea of a third term, observing that the current government is out of ideas about how to handle Algeria's multiple problems. Opposition Algerian National Front (FNA) leader Moussa Touati has also spoken out against the third term. Former Prime Minister Ouyahia (yet another name often mentioned as an alternative to Bouteflika) told the media at the end of December that Algeria had more pressing problems than a constitutional amendment or third-term for Bouteflika. Ouyahia took a swipe at Belkhadem, who replaced him as prime minister, noting that it was up to Bouteflika to propose changes to the constitution, not the PM. Over dinner with Ambassador January 7, senior RND parliamentarian and former Finance Minister Abdelkader Harichane said the RND likely would go along ultimately with another term for Bouteflika but RND leaders do not want all attention focused so early on the 2009 presidential election.

¶9. (C) Meanwhile, Islamist MSP party leader Abu Jerra Soltani, the third member of the ruling government coalition, also has expressed public wariness at the speed of the third term drive, saying it is too early to discuss the issue. Privately, Noureddine Ait Messaoudene, Soltani's chief of staff, told us on December 15 that the MSP was surprised and worried by the speed and determination of those pushing a Bouteflika third term, since Bouteflika himself has been completely silent on the issue, leaving Belkhadem to express the intentions of the president. The proper process, said Ait Messaoudene, was for the president to personally express his intentions, especially to his coalition partners RND and MSP, and for the official third term initiative to come from the executive secretariat of the FLN. (Comment: Ait Messaoudene was careful not to say that the MSP would oppose Bouteflika. Instead, he objected to the manner that the process was moving ahead. End Comment.)

THE "SYRIANIZATION" OF ALGERIA?

¶10. (C) Belayat, the former FLN senator and current member of the party's Executive Committee, painted a broader-reaching scenario to the FLN/RND/MSP acting in concert. Referring to an open letter from presidentally appointed FLN Senator Abderrazak Bouhara to Prime Minister Belkhadem, Belayat pointed to a strategy he said was being whispered in the

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hallways of FLN headquarters. Bouhara, who supports Belkhadem and Bouteflika, was proposing a popular political front, to include all members of the three-party ruling coalition. This rally would formally endorse a third term for Bouteflika, and essentially serve to fuse the three parties into one.

¶11. (C) Belayat told us that Bouteflika currently gives his full trust only to his family, and that he had entrusted his brother Said Bouteflika with protecting the interests of family and friends in the event of his death. "Do not be surprised," Belayat predicted, "if Said enters the picture, either as vice-president or ordained successor, in the name of continuity and stability." The result of this potential scenario, combined with Bouhara's attack on pluralism and the dominant role of the security services, would effectively be "the Syrianization of Algeria," Belayat concluded. (Comment: Other political insiders here are whispering to us that Said Bouteflika, who has multiple business interests here, is very involved in promoting a third term for his brother. End Comment.)

COMMENT

¶12. (C) What a difference a year makes. A year ago there

was no sign of movement on another term for Bouteflika, as the man's health was a huge concern and there appeared to be no consensus within the Algerian establishment about moving ahead. That has changed entirely. Prime Minister Belkhadem's drive to secure constitutional and popular approval for a Bouteflika third term is moving ahead steadily, dragging a reluctant FLN and wary MSP and RND coalition partners along for the ride. From what our contacts tell us, the process has thus far not been illegal, although it has skirted accepted and transparent political party procedures by avoiding open and honest debate and consultation with a broad spectrum of the FLN membership. Bouteflika has already begun a series of national campaign stops, designed to elicit an allegedly spontaneous public call for a third term such as was splashed across pro-government newspaper headlines on January 9 after his visit to Tamanrasset. The headlines of the January 10 government newspaper say it all: "A Popular Call for a Third Term". The Constitutional Council is prepared for Bouteflika to present the initiative formally in February. To be sure, many of our contacts acknowledge that while there are many possible presidential candidates for the 2009 Algerian presidential elections, Bouteflika now enjoys the greatest public support. Most of the other possible candidates have little name recognition outside the elite political circles. While Algerians who want a wider opening of the political system here would like a real choice in 2009, a Bouteflika candidacy almost surely will mean that the fix is in.

FORD